1.3: Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egypt

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c. 5000 - 30 B.C.E.

Beginner’s guide: Ancient Egypt

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Ancient Egypt, an introduction

by DR. AMY CALVERT
Egypt’s impact on later cultures was immense. You could say that Egypt provided the building blocks for Greek and Roman culture, and, through them, influenced all of the Western tradition. Today, Egyptian imagery, concepts, and perspectives are found everywhere; you will find them in architectural forms, on money, and in our day to day lives. Many cosmetic surgeons, for example, use the silhouette of Queen Nefertiti (whose name means “the beautiful one has come”) in their advertisements.

**Longevity**

Ancient Egyptian civilization lasted for more than 3000 years and showed an incredible amount of continuity. That is more than 15 times the age of the United States, and consider how often our culture shifts; less than 10 years ago, there was no Facebook, Twitter, or Youtube.

While today we consider the Greco-Roman period to be in the distant past, it should be noted that Cleopatra VII’s reign (which ended in 30 B.C.E.) is closer to our own time than it was to that of the construction of the pyramids of Giza. It took humans nearly 4000 years to build something—anything—taller than the Great Pyramids. Contrast that span to the modern era; we get excited when a record lasts longer than a decade.

**Consistency and stability**

Egypt’s stability is in stark contrast to the Ancient Near East of the same period, which endured an overlapping series of cultures and upheavals with amazing regularity. The earliest royal monuments, such as the Narmer Palette carved around 3100 B.C.E., display identical royal costumes and poses as those seen on later rulers, even Ptolemaic kings on their temples 3000 years later.
A vast amount of Egyptian imagery, especially royal imagery that was governed by decorum (a sense of what was 'appropriate'), remained stupefyingly consistent throughout its history. This is why, especially to the untrained eye, their art appears extremely static—and in terms of symbols, gestures, and the way the body is rendered, it was. It was intentional. The Egyptians were aware of their consistency, which they viewed as stability, divine balance, and clear evidence of the correctness of their culture.

This consistency was closely related to a fundamental belief that depictions had an impact beyond the image itself—tomb scenes of the deceased receiving food, or temple scenes of the king performing perfect rituals for the gods—were functionally causing those things to occur in the divine realm. If the image of the bread loaf was omitted from the deceased’s table, they had no bread in the Afterlife; if the king was depicted with the incorrect ritual implement, the ritual was incorrect and this could have dire consequences. This belief led to an active resistance to change in codified depictions.

The earliest recorded tourist graffiti on the planet came from a visitor from the time of Ramses II who left their appreciative mark at the already 1300-year-old site of the Step Pyramid at Saqqara, the earliest of the massive royal stone monuments. They were understandably impressed by the works of their ancestors and endeavored to continue that ancient legacy.

Geography

Egypt is a land of duality and cycles, both in topography and culture. The geography is almost entirely rugged, barren desert, except for an explosion of green that straddles either side of the Nile as it flows the length of the country. The river emerges from far to the south, deep in Africa, and empties into the Mediterranean sea in the north after spreading from a single channel into a fan-shaped system, known as a delta, at its northernmost section.

The influence of this river on Egyptian culture and development cannot be overstated—without its presence, the civilization would have been entirely different. The Nile provided not only a constant source of life-giving water, but created the fertile lands that fed the growth of this unique (and uniquely resilient) culture.

![View from the high peak of the Theban hills showing the sharp delineation between the lush Valley and the barren desert. Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/Sec1.03.01.04)

Each year, fed by melting snows in the far-off headlands, the river overflowed its banks in an annual flood that covered...
the ground with a rich, black silt and produced incredibly fertile fields. The Egyptians referred to this as Kemet, the “black lands,” and contrasted this dense, dark soil against the Deshret, the “red lands” of the sterile desert; the line between these zones was (and in most cases still is) a literal line. The visual effect is stark, appearing almost artificial in its precision.

**Time – cyclical and linear**

The annual inundation of the Nile was also a reliable, and measurable, cycle that helped form their concept of the passage of time. In fact, the calendar we use today is derived from one developed by the ancient Egyptians. They divided the year into 3 seasons: akhet “inundation,” peret “growing/emergence.” and shemw “harvest.” Each season was, in turn, divided into four 30-day months. Although this annual cycle, paired with the daily solar cycle that is so evident in the desert, led to a powerful drive to see the universe in cyclical time, this idea existed simultaneously with the reality of linear time.

These two concepts—the cyclical and the linear—came to be associated with two of their primary deities: Osiris, the eternal lord of the dead, and Re, the sun god who was reborn with each dawn.

**Early development: The Predynastic period**

The civilization of Egypt obviously did not spring fully formed from the Nile mud; although the massive pyramids at Giza may appear to the uninitiated to have appeared out of nowhere, they were founded on thousands of years of cultural and technological development and experimentation. “Dynastic” Egypt—sometimes referred to as “Pharaonic” (after “pharaoh,” the Greek title of the Egyptian kings derived from the Egyptian title per aA, “Great House”) which was the time when the country was largely unified under a single ruler, begins around 3100 B.C.E.

The period before this, lasting from about 5000 B.C.E. until unification, is referred to as Predynastic by modern scholars. Prior to this were thriving Paleolithic and Neolithic groups, stretching back hundreds of thousands of years, descended from northward migrating *homo erectus* who settled along the Nile Valley. During the Predynastic period, ceramics, figurines, mace heads, and other artifacts such as slate palettes used for grinding pigments, begin to appear, as does imagery that will become iconic during the Pharaonic era—we can see the first hints of what is to come.

**Dynasties**

It is important to recognize that the dynastic divisions modern scholars use were not used by the ancients themselves. These divisions were created in the first Western-style history of Egypt, written by an Egyptian priest named Manetho in the 3rd century B.C.E. Each of the 33 dynasties included a series of rulers usually related by kinship or the location of their seat of power. Egyptian history is also divided into larger chunks, known as “kingdoms” and “periods,” to distinguish times of strength and unity from those of change, foreign rule, or disunity.
The Egyptians themselves referred to their history in relation to the ruler of the time. Years were generally recorded as the regnal dates (from the Latin regnum, meaning kingdom or rule) of the ruling king, so that with each new reign, the numbers began anew. Later kings recorded the names of their predecessors in vast “king-lists” on the walls of their temples and depicted themselves offering to the rulers who came before them—one of the best known examples is in the temple of Seti I at Abydos.

These lists were often condensed, with some rulers (such as the contentious and disruptive Akhenaten) and even entire dynasties omitted from the record; they are not truly history, rather they are a form of ancestor worship, a celebration of the consistency of kingship of which the current ruler was a part.

**The pharaoh—not just a king**

Kings in Egypt were complex intermediaries that straddled the terrestrial and divine realms. They were, obviously, living humans, but upon accession to the throne, they also embodied the eternal office of kingship itself. The ka, or spirit, of kingship was often depicted as a separate entity standing behind the human ruler. This divine aspect of the office of kingship was what gave authority to the human ruler. The living king was associated with the god Horus, the powerful, virile falcon-headed god who was believed to bestow the throne to the first human king.

Horus’s immensely important father, Osiris, was the lord of the underworld. One of the original divine rulers of Egypt, this deity embodied the promise of regeneration. Cruelly murdered by his brother Seth, the god of the chaotic desert, Osiris was revived through the potent magic of his wife Isis. Through her knowledge and skill, Osiris was able to sire the miraculous Horus, who avenged his father and threw his criminal uncle off the throne to take his rightful place.

Osiris became ruler of the realm of the dead, the eternal source of regeneration in the Afterlife. Deceased kings were identified with this god, creating a cycle where the dead king fused with the divine king of the dead and his successor “defeated” death to take his place on the throne as Horus.

**Additional resources:**

[For instructors: related lesson plan on Art History Teaching Resources](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt)

[An introduction to ancient Egypt from the British Museum](https://www.britishmuseum.org/)

[Egyptian art on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/timeline)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Ancient Egyptian art

by DR. AMY CALVERT
Appreciating and understanding ancient Egyptian art

Ancient Egyptian art must be viewed from the standpoint of the ancient Egyptians to understand it. The somewhat static, usually formal, strangely abstract, and often blocky nature of much Egyptian imagery has, at times, led to unfavorable comparisons with later, and much more ‘naturalistic,’ Greek or Renaissance art. However, the art of the Egyptians served a vastly different purpose than that of these later cultures.

Art not meant to be seen

While today we marvel at the glittering treasures from the tomb of Tutankhamun, the sublime reliefs in New Kingdom tombs, and the serene beauty of Old Kingdom statuary, it is imperative to remember that the majority of these works were never intended to be seen—that was simply not their purpose.
The function of Egyptian art

These images, whether statues or relief, were designed to benefit a divine or deceased recipient. Statuary provided a place for the recipient to manifest and receive the benefit of ritual action. Most statues show a formal frontality, meaning they are arranged straight ahead, because they were designed to face the ritual being performed before them. Many statues were also originally placed in recessed niches or other architectural settings—contexts that would make frontality their expected and natural mode.

Statuary, whether divine, royal, or elite, provided a kind of conduit for the spirit (or ka) of that being to interact with the terrestrial realm. Divine cult statues (few of which survive) were the subject of daily rituals of clothing, anointing, and perfuming with incense and were carried in processions for special festivals so that the people could “see” them (they were almost all entirely shrouded from view, but their ‘presence’ was felt).

Royal and elite statuary served as intermediaries between the people and the gods. Family chapels with the statuary of a deceased forefather could serve as a sort of ‘family temple.’ There were festivals in honor of the dead, where the family would come and eat in the chapel, offering food for the Afterlife, flowers (symbols of rebirth), and incense (the scent of which was considered divine). Preserved letters let us know that the deceased was actively petitioned for their assistance, both in this world and the next.

What we see in museums

Generally, the works we see on display in museums were products of royal or elite workshops; these pieces fit best with our modern aesthetic and ideas of beauty. Most museum basements, however, are packed with hundreds (even thousands!) of other objects made for people of lower status—small statuary, amulets, coffins, and stelae (similar to modern tombstones) that are completely recognizable, but rarely displayed. These pieces generally show less quality in the workmanship; being oddly proportioned or poorly executed; they are less often considered ‘art’ in the modern sense. However, these objects served the exact same function of providing benefit to their owners (and to the same degree of effectiveness), as those made for the elite.
Modes of representation for three-dimensional art

Three-dimensional representations, while being quite formal, also aimed to reproduce the real-world—statuary of gods, royalty, and the elite was designed to convey an idealized version of that individual. Some aspects of 'naturalism' were dictated by the material. Stone statuary, for example, was quite closed—with arms held close to the sides, limited positions, a strong back pillar that provided support, and with the fill spaces left between limbs.
Wood and metal statuary, in contrast, was more expressive—arms could be extended and hold separate objects, spaces between the limbs were opened to create a more realistic appearance, and more positions were possible. Stone, wood, and metal statuary of elite figures, however, all served the same functions and retained the same type of formalization and frontality. Only statuettes of lower status people displayed a wide range of possible actions, and these pieces were focused on the actions, which benefited the elite owner, not the people involved.

**Modes of representation for two-dimensional art**

Two-dimensional art represented the world quite differently. Egyptian artists embraced the two-dimensional surface and attempted to provide the most representative aspects of each element in the scenes rather than attempting to create vistas that replicated the real world.

Each object or element in a scene was rendered from its most recognizable angle and these were then grouped together to create the whole. This is why images of people show their face, waist, and limbs in profile, but eye and shoulders frontally. These scenes are complex composite images that provide complete information about the various elements, rather than ones designed from a single viewpoint, which would not be as comprehensive in the data they conveyed.

**Registers**

![Chaotic fighting scene on a painted box from the tomb of Tutankhamen in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (New Kingdom). Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/1.03.06%3A_Egyptian_Art/1.03.06.03%3A_Modes_of_Representation)

Scenes were ordered in parallel lines, known as registers. These registers separate the scene as well as provide ground lines for the figures. Scenes without registers are unusual and were generally only used to specifically evoke chaos; battle and hunting scenes will often show the prey or foreign armies without groundlines. Registers were also used to convey information about the scenes—the higher up in the scene, the higher the status; overlapping figures imply that the ones underneath are further away, as are those elements that are higher within the register.
Hierarchy of scale

Difference in scale was the most commonly used method for conveying hierarchy—the larger the scale of the figures, the more important they were. Kings were often shown at the same scale as deities, but both are shown larger than the elite and far larger than the average Egyptian.

Text and image

Text accompanied almost all images. In statuary, identifying text will appear on the back pillar or base, and relief usually has captions or longer texts that complete and elaborate on the scenes. Hieroglyphs were often rendered as tiny works of art in themselves, even though these small pictures do not always stand for what they depict; many are instead phonetic sounds. Some, however, are logographic, meaning they stand for an object or concept.

![Image of hieroglyphs](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/1.2.03_Hierarchy%26Text%26Image/image11.png)

Figure \(\PageIndex{11}\): Highly detailed raised relief hieroglyphs on the White Chapel of Senusret I at Karnak (Middle Kingdom). Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert

The lines blur between text and image in many cases. For instance, the name of a figure in the text on a statue will regularly omit the determinative (an unspoken sign at the end of a word that aids identification—for example, verbs of motion are followed by a pair of walking legs, names of men end with the image of a man, names of gods with the image
of a seated god, etc.) at the end of the name. In these instances, the representation itself serves this function.

Additional resources:

Collection Tour of Egyptian Art: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The Giza Archives

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Figure \(\PageIndex{12}\): More Smarthistory images...
Lights and techniques in ancient Egyptian art

by DR. AMY CALVERT

A wide variety

Egyptian artists used a wide array of materials, both local and imported, from very early in their history. For instance, already in the Predynastic period we find figurines carved from lapis lazuli—a lustrous blue stone that originates in what is now Afghanistan and indicates the early presence of robust trade routes.

![Group of stones collected in Egypt showing the range of colors and textures available to the ancient artists.](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Anci...)

Stone

There were numerous native stones used for statuary, including the ubiquitous soft limestone of the desert cliffs that line most of the Nile valley, as well as sandstone, calcite, and schist.

Harder stones include quartzite, diorite, granite, and basalt. Carving on softer stones was done using copper chisels and stone tools; hard stone required tools of yet harder stone, copper alloys, and the use of abrasive sand to shape them. Polishing was achieved with a smooth rubbing stone and abrasive sands with a fine grit.
Figure \(\PageIndex{14}\): Menkaure (Mycerinus) and Khamerernebty(?), graywacke, c. 2490-2472 B.C.E. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

**Painted statuary**

Most statuary was painted; even stones selected for the symbolism of their color were often painted. For instance, the exemplary statues of Menkaure (left), builder of the smallest of the three major pyramids at Giza, were executed in dark schist (also called graywacke). This smooth black stone is connected with Osiris, resurrected god of the dead who was often shown with black or green skin referring to the fertile silt and lush vegetation of the Nile valley.

These images preserve traces of red paint on the king’s skin indicating that, when completed and placed in his memorial temple near his pyramid, they would have appeared lifelike in coloration. With time, the paint would have flaked away, revealing the black stone underneath and explicitly linking the deceased king with the Lord of the Underworld.
Wood

Figure \(\PageIndex{15}\): Ceremonial gilded wooden shield from the tomb of Tutakhamun. Egyptian Museum, Cairo (New Kingdom) (photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

Egyptian artists also used a variety of woods in their work, including the native acacia, tamarisk, and sycamore fig as well as fir, cedar, and other conifers imported from Syria. Artisans excelled at puzzling together small, irregular pieces of wood and pegged them into place to create statuary, coffins, boxes, and furniture.

 Metals

They also executed pieces in various metals, including copper, copper alloys (such as bronze), gold, and silver. Cult statues of gods were made in gold and silver—materials identified by myth as their skin and bones—and were often quite small. Very few metal statues survive because they were often melted down and the material reused, although preserved examples from the Old and Middle Kingdoms demonstrate that they were skilled not only in sheet metal forming, but also practiced complex casting.

Jewelry work was quite sophisticated even in the Old Kingdom, as demonstrated by some highly creative pieces depicted in tomb scenes. A cache of royal jewelry from the tombs of Middle Kingdom princesses displays extremely high levels of skill in terms of design as well as precisely cut stone inlays, repoussé, and cloisonné.

Many objects, especially small amulets and inlays, were made from a manufactured material known as Egyptian
faience. This quartz-based medium could be easily shaped, molded, and mass produced. The glaze coating could be almost any color, depending on the minerals used in the composition, although turquoise blue is the most common.

![Faience](image)

Figure \(\PageIndex{16}\): Tutankhamun’s lunar pectoral in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (New Kingdom) (photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

**Relief sculpture**

Relief was usually carved before being painted. The two primary classes of relief are raised relief (where the figures stand up out from the surface) and sunk relief (where the figures are cut into and below the surface). The surface would be smoothed with a layer of plaster and then painted. If the surface was not carved before painting, several layers of mud plaster would be applied to create a flat plane.
The drawing surface would be delineated using gridded guidelines, snapped onto the wall using string coated in red pigment dust (very much like chalk lines used by modern carpenters). This grid helped the artists properly proportion the figures and lay out the scenes. Scene elements were drafted out using red paint, corrections noted in black paint, and then the painting was executed one color at a time. Even on carved relief, many elements in a scene would be executed only in paint and not cut into the surface.

Pigments

Most pigments in Egypt were derived from local minerals. White was often made from gypsum, black from carbon, reds and yellows from iron oxides, blue and green from azurite and malachite, and bright yellow (representing gold) from orpiment. These minerals were ground and then mixed with a plant or animal based glue to make a medium able to attach to the walls. They could be applied as a single plane, but were also layered to create subtle effects and additional colors, such as pink or gray. More information on the materials used to make pigments, as well as a discussion of the symbolism of various colors may be found in the article “Aspects of Color in Ancient Egypt” at Egyptological.
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
The mummification process

by THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM

To prepare a body for the afterlife, ancient Egyptians removed organs, dried the body, wrapped it, and more.
Predynastic and Old Kingdom

“Dynastic” Egypt—sometimes referred to as “Pharaonic”—was the time when the country was largely unified under a single ruler, starting around 3100 B.C.E. The period before this, lasting from about 5000 B.C.E. until unification, is referred to as Predynastic by modern scholars.

**c. 5000 - 2150 B.C.E.**

Palette of King Narmer

*by DR. AMY CALVERT*
Vitally important, but difficult to interpret

Some artifacts are of such vital importance to our understanding of ancient cultures that they are truly unique and utterly irreplaceable. The gold mask of Tutankhamun was allowed to leave Egypt for display overseas; the *Narmer Palette*, on the other hand, is so valuable that it has never been permitted to leave the country.

Discovered among a group of sacred implements ritually buried in a deposit within an early temple of the falcon god Horus at the site of Hierakonpolis (the capital of Egypt during the pre-dynastic period), this large ceremonial object is one of the most important artifacts from the dawn of Egyptian civilization. The beautifully carved palette, 63.5 cm (more than 2 feet) in height and made of smooth grayish-green siltstone, is decorated on both faces with detailed low relief. These scenes show a king, identified by name as Narmer, and a series of ambiguous scenes that have been difficult to interpret and have resulted in a number of theories regarding their meaning.

The high quality of the workmanship, its original function as a ritual object dedicated to a god, and the complexity of the imagery clearly indicate that this was a significant object, but a satisfactory interpretation of the scenes has been elusive.

What was the palette used for?

The object itself is a monumental version of a type of daily use item commonly found in the Predynastic period—palettes were generally flat, minimally decorated stone objects used for grinding and mixing minerals for cosmetics. Dark eyeliner was an essential aspect of life in the sun-drenched region; like the dark streaks placed under the eyes of modern athletes, black cosmetic around the eyes served to reduce glare. Basic cosmetic palettes were among the typical grave goods found during this early era.

In addition to these simple, purely functional, palettes however, there were also a number of larger, far more elaborate palettes created in this period. These objects still served the function of being a ground for grinding and mixing cosmetics, but they were also carefully carved with relief sculpture. Many of the earlier palettes display animals—some real, some fantastic—while later examples, like the Narmer palette, focus on human actions. Research suggests that
these decorated palettes were used in temple ceremonies, perhaps to grind or mix makeup to be ritually applied to the image of the god. Later temple ritual included elaborate daily ceremonies involving the anointing and dressing of divine images; these palettes likely indicate an early incarnation of this process.

A ceremonial object, ritually buried

The *Palette of Narmer* was discovered in 1898 by James Quibell and Frederick Green. It was found with a collection of other objects that had been used for ceremonial purposes and then ritually buried within the temple at Hierakonpolis.

Temple caches of this type are not uncommon. There was a great deal of focus on ritual and votive objects (offerings to the God) in temples. Every ruler, elite individual, and anyone else who could afford it, donated items to the temple to show their piety and increase their connection to the deity. After a period of time, the temple would be full of these objects and space would need to be cleared for new votive donations. However, since they had been dedicated to a temple and sanctified, the old items that needed to be cleared out could not simply be thrown away or sold. Instead, the general practice was to bury them in a pit under the temple floor. Often, these caches include objects from a range of dates and a mix of types, from royal statuary to furniture.

The “Main Deposit” at Hierakonpolis, where the Narmer Palette was discovered, contained many hundreds of objects, including a number of large relief-covered ceremonial mace-heads, ivory statuettes, carved knife handles, figurines of scorpions and other animals, stone vessels, and a second elaborately decorated palette (now in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford) known as the *Two Dogs Palette*.

![Two Dogs Palette](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/World_History/Elements_of_History/11%3A_Ancient_Civilizations/11.03%3A_An…)

Figure: Two Dogs Palette, Hierakonpolis, Egypt c.3100 B.C.E. (Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)
Conventions that remain the same for thousands of years

There are several reasons the *Narmer Palette* is considered to be of such importance. First, it is one of very few such palettes discovered in a controlled excavation. Second, there are a number of formal and iconographic characteristics appearing on the Narmer palette that remain conventional in Egyptian two-dimensional art for the following three millennia. These include the way the figures are represented, the scenes being organized in regular horizontal zones known as registers, and the use of hierarchical scale to indicate relative importance of the individuals. In addition, much of the regalia worn by the king, such as the crowns, kilts, royal beard, and bull tail, as well as other visual elements, such as the pose Narmer takes on one of the faces where he grasps an enemy by the hair and prepares to smash his skull with a mace, continue to be utilized from this time all the way through the Roman era.

**Figure \(\PageIndex{22}\)**

What we see on the palette

The king is represented twice in human form, once on each face, followed by his sandal-bearer. He may also be represented as a powerful bull, destroying a walled city with his massive horns, in a mode that again becomes conventional—pharaoh is regularly referred to as “Strong Bull.”

In addition to the primary scenes, the palette includes a pair of fantastic creatures, known as serpopards—leopards with long, snaky necks—who are collared and controlled by a pair of attendants. Their necks entwine and define the recess where the makeup preparation took place. The lowest register on both sides include images of dead foes, while both uppermost registers display hybrid human-bull heads and the name of the king. The frontal bull heads are likely connected to a sky goddess known as Bat and are related to heaven and the horizon. The name of the king, written hieroglyphically as a catfish and a chisel, is contained within a squared element that represents a palace facade.
Possible interpretation: unification of Upper and Lower Egypt

As mentioned above, there have been a number of theories related to the scenes carved on this palette. Some have interpreted the battle scenes as a historical narrative record of the initial unification of Egypt under one ruler, supported by the general timing (as this is the period of the unification) and the fact that Narmer sports the crown connected to Upper Egypt on one face of the palette and the crown of Lower Egypt on the other—this is the first preserved example where both crowns are used by the same ruler. Other theories suggest that, rather than an actual historical representation, these scenes were purely ceremonial and related to the concept of unification in general.

Another interpretation: the sun and the king

More recent research on the decorative program has connected the imagery to the careful balance of order and chaos (known as ma’at and isfet) that was a fundamental element of the Egyptian idea of the cosmos. It may also be related to the daily journey of the sun god that becomes a central aspect in the Egyptian religion in the subsequent centuries.
The scene, showing Narmer wearing the Lower Egyptian Red Crown* (with its distinctive curl), depicts him processing towards the decapitated bodies of his foes. The two rows of prone bodies are placed below an image of a high-proved boat preparing to pass through an open gate. This may be an early reference to the journey of the sun god in his boat. In later texts, the Red Crown is connected with bloody battles fought by the sun god just before the rosy-fingered dawn on his daily journey and this scene may well be related to this. It is interesting to note that the foes are shown as not only executed, but rendered completely impotent—their castrated penises have been placed atop their severed heads.

On the other face, Narmer wears the Upper Egyptian White Crown* (which looks rather like a bowling pin) as he grasps an inert foe by the hair and prepares to crush his skull. The White Crown is related to the dazzling brilliance of the full midday sun at its zenith as well as the luminous nocturnal light of the stars and moon. By wearing both crowns, Narmer may not only be ceremonially expressing his dominance over the unified Egypt, but also the early importance of the solar cycle and the king's role in this daily process.

This fascinating object is an incredible example of early Egyptian art. The imagery preserved on this palette provides a peek ahead to the richness of both the visual aspects and religious concepts that develop in the ensuing periods. It is a vitally important artifact of extreme significance for our understanding of the development of Egyptian culture on multiple levels.

*The Red Crown of Lower Egypt and the White Crown of Upper Egypt were the earliest crowns worn by the king and are closely connected with the unification of the country that sparks full-blown Egyptian civilization. The earliest representation of them worn by the same ruler is on the Narmer Palette, signifying that the king was ruling over both areas of the country. Soon after the unification, the fifth ruler of the First Dynasty is shown wearing the two crowns simultaneously, combined into one. This crown, often referred to as the Double Crown, remains a primary crown worn
by pharaoh throughout Egyptian history. The separate Red and White crowns, however, continue to be worn as well and retain their geographic connections. There are a number of Egyptian words used for these crowns (nine for the White and 11 for the Red), but the most common—deshret and hedjet—refer to the colors red and white, respectively. It is from these identifying terms that we take their modern name. Early texts make it clear that these crowns were believed to be imbued with divine power and were personified as goddesses.

Additional resources:

Decorative Palettes of the 4th millenium
Hierakonpolis website
Publication on the excavation

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:

Figure \(\PageIndex{26}\): More Smarthistory images...
The Great Pyramids of Giza

by DR. AMY CALVERT

![Pyramid of Khafre](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/p01-03-0027.jpg)

Figure \(\PageIndex{27}\): Pyramid of Khafre (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

One of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world

The last remaining of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, the great pyramids of Giza are perhaps the most famous and discussed structures in history. These massive monuments were unsurpassed in height for thousands of years after their construction and continue to amaze and enthrall us with their overwhelming mass and seemingly impossible perfection. Their exacting orientation and mind-boggling construction has elicited many theories about their origins, including unsupported suggestions that they had extra-terrestrial impetus. However, by examining the several hundred years prior to their emergence on the Giza plateau, it becomes clear that these incredible structures were the result of many experiments, some more successful than others, and represent an apogee in the development of the royal mortuary complex.

Three pyramids, three rulers

The three primary pyramids on the Giza plateau were built over the span of three generations by the rulers Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure. Each pyramid was part of a royal mortuary complex that also included a temple at its base and a long stone causeway (some nearly 1 kilometer in length) leading east from the plateau to a valley temple on the edge of the floodplain.
Other (smaller) pyramids, and small tombs

In addition to these major structures, several smaller pyramids belonging to queens are arranged as satellites. A major cemetery of smaller tombs, known as mastabas (Arabic for ‘bench’ in reference to their shape—flat-roofed, rectangular, with sloping sides), fills the area to the east and west of the pyramid of Khufu and were constructed in a grid-like pattern for prominent members of the court. Being buried near the pharaoh was a great honor and helped ensure a prized place in the afterlife.
A reference to the sun

The shape of the pyramid was a solar reference, perhaps intended as a solidified version of the rays of the sun. Texts talk about the sun’s rays as a ramp the pharaoh mounts to climb to the sky—the earliest pyramids, such as the Step Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara—were actually designed as a staircase. The pyramid was also clearly connected to the sacred ben-ben stone, an icon of the primeval mound that was considered the place of initial creation. The pyramid was considered a place of regeneration for the deceased ruler.

Construction

Many questions remain about the construction of these massive monuments, and theories abound as to the actual methods used. The workforce needed to build these structures is also still much discussed. Discovery of a town for workers to the south of the plateau has offered some answers. It is likely that there was a permanent group of skilled craftsmen and builders who were supplemented by seasonal crews of approximately 2,000 conscripted peasants. These crews were divided into gangs of 200 men, with each group further divided into teams of 20. Experiments indicate that these groups of 20 men could haul the 2.5 ton blocks from quarry to pyramid in about 20 minutes, their path eased by a lubricated surface of wet silt. An estimated 340 stones could be moved daily from quarry to construction site, particularly when one considers that many of the blocks (such as those in the upper courses) were considerably smaller.
Backstory

We are used to seeing the pyramids at Giza in alluring photographs, where they appear as massive and remote monuments rising up from an open, barren desert. Visitors might be surprised to find, then, that there is a golf course and resort only a few hundred feet from the Great Pyramid, and that the burgeoning suburbs of Giza (part of the greater metropolitan area of Cairo) have expanded right up to the foot of the Sphinx. This urban encroachment and the problems that come with it—such as pollution, waste, illegal activities, and auto traffic—are now the biggest threats to these invaluable examples of global cultural heritage.

The pyramids were inscribed into the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979, and since 1990, the organization has sponsored over a dozen missions to evaluate their status. It has supported the restoration of the Sphinx, as well as measures to curb the impact of tourism and manage the growth of the neighboring village. Still, threats to the site continue: air pollution from waste incineration contributes to the degradation of the stones, and the massive illegal quarrying of sand on the neighboring plateau has created holes large enough to be seen on Google Earth. Egypt’s 2011 uprisings and their chaotic political and economic aftermath also negatively impacted tourism, one of the country’s most important industries, and the number of visitors is only now beginning to rise once more.

UNESCO has continually monitored these issues, but its biggest task with regard to Giza has been to advocate for the rerouting of a highway that was originally slated to cut through the desert between the pyramids and the necropolis of Saqqara to the south. The government eventually agreed to build the highway north of the pyramids. However, as the
Cairo metropolitan area (the largest in Africa, with a population of over 20 million) continues to expand, planners are now proposing a multilane tunnel to be constructed underneath the Giza Plateau. UNESCO and ICOMOS are calling for in-depth studies of the project’s potential impact, as well as an overall site management plan for the Giza pyramids that would include ways to halt the continued impact of illegal dumping and quarrying.

As massive as they are, the pyramids at Giza are not immutable. With the rapid growth of Cairo, they will need sufficient attention and protection if they are to remain intact as key touchstones of ancient history.

Backstory by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

Additional resources

Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

UNESCO webpage for Memphis and its Necropolis – the Pyramid Fields from Giza to Dahshur

Giza 3D

Giza archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Building the Great Pyramid, BBC


Pyramid of Khufu

by DR. AMY CALVERT
Size

The Great Pyramid, the largest of the three, was built by the pharaoh Khufu and rises to a height of 146 meters (481 feet) with a base length of more than 230 meters (750 feet) per side. The greatest difference in length among the four sides is a mere 4.4 cm (1 ¾ inches) and the base is level within 2.1 cm (less than an inch), an astonishing engineering accomplishment.

Construction: inner core stones, and outer casing stones

The pyramid contains an estimated 2,300,000 blocks, some of which are upwards of 50 tons. Like the pyramids built by his predecessor Snefru and those that followed on the Giza plateau, Khufu’s pyramid is constructed of inner, roughly hewn, locally quarried core stones, which is all we see today, and angled, outer casing blocks laid in even horizontal courses with spaces filled with gypsum plaster.

The fine outer casing stones, which have long since been removed, were laid with great precision. These blocks of white Tura limestone would have given the pyramid a smooth surface and been quite bright and reflective. At the very top of the pyramid would have sat a capstone, known as a pyramidion, that may have been gilt. This dazzling point, shining in the intense sunlight, would have been visible for a great distance.
Interior

The interior chambers and passageways of Khufu’s pyramid are unique and include a number of enigmatic features. There is an unfinished subterranean chamber whose function is mysterious as well as a number of so-called ‘air shafts’ that radiate out from the upper chambers.
These have recently been explored using small robots, but a series of blocking stones have obscured the passages. When entering the pyramid, one has to crawl up a cramped ascending chamber that opens suddenly into a stunning Grand Gallery. This corbelled passage soars to a height of 8.74 m (26 feet) and leads up to the King’s Chamber, which is constructed entirely from red granite brought from the southern quarries at Aswan.

Above the King’s Chamber are five stress-relieving chambers of massive granite blocks topped with immense cantilevered blocks forming a pent roof to distribute the weight of the mountain of masonry above it. The king’s sarcophagus, also carved from red granite, sits empty at the exact central axis of the pyramid. This burial chamber was sealed with a series of massive granite blocks and the entrance to the shaft filled with limestone in an effort to obscure the opening.

**Boats for the afterlife**

Khufu’s mortuary complex also included seven large boat pits. Five of these are located to the east of the pyramid and
were a sort of model; these brick-lined boat shaped elements were probably intended for use in the afterlife to transport the king to stellar destinations. Boat burials and models of this type had a long history in royal mortuary contexts—a fleet of 14 such pits, containing actual boats averaging 18-19 meters (60 feet) in length encased inside, were discovered at a Dynasty 1 mortuary enclosure in Abydos, the cemetery of Egypt's earliest kings. Often, however, as with Khufu, the pits were simply boat shaped models rather than containing actual boats.

![Reconstructed funerary boat of Khufu](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt%27s_Ancient_Egypt%27s_Biggest%20Pyramids%20%26%20Pharaohs/Section_01.03.01%3A%20Heritage%20of%20Pharaonic%20Egypt/student_pages/figures/5-ReconstructedFuneraryBoatKhufu.jpg)

**Figure \(\PageIndex{35}\):** Reconstructed funerary boat of Khufu (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

In addition to these model boat pits, however, on the south side of the pyramid Khufu had two massive, rectangular stone lined pits that contained completely disassembled boats. One of these has been removed and reconstructed in a special museum on the south side of the pyramid. This cedar boat measures 43.3 meters (142 feet) in length and was constructed of 1,224 separate pieces stitched together with ropes. These boats appear to have been used for the funerary procession and as ritual objects connected to the last earthly voyage of the king, and were then dismantled and interred.

Google Maps Feature

**Additional resources:**


**Pyramid of Khafre and the Great Sphinx**

by [DR. AMY CALVERT](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt%27s_Ancient_Egypt%27s_Biggest%20Pyramids%20%26%20Pharaohs/Section_01.03.01%3A%20Heritage%20of%20Pharaonic%20Egypt/student_pages/figures/5-ReconstructedFuneraryBoatKhufu.jpg)
Size and appearance

The second great pyramid of Giza, that was built by Khufu’s second son Khafre, has a section of outer casing that still survives at the very top (and which would have entirely covered all three of the great pyramids at Giza). Although this monument appears larger than that of his father, it is actually slightly smaller but was constructed 10 m (33 feet) higher on the plateau.

Interior

The interior is much simpler than that of Khufu’s pyramid, with a single burial chamber, one small subsidiary chamber, and two passageways. The mortuary temple at the pyramid base was more complex than that of Khufu and was filled with statuary of the king—over 52 life-size or larger images originally filled the structure.

Valley temple

Khafre’s valley temple, located at the east end of the causeway leading from the pyramid base, is beautifully preserved. It was constructed of megalithic blocks sheathed with granite and floors of polished white calcite. Statue bases indicate that an additional 24 images of the pharaoh were originally located in this temple.
The Great Sphinx

Right next to the causeway leading from Khafre's valley temple to the mortuary temple sits the first truly colossal sculpture in Egyptian history: the Great Sphinx. This close association indicates that this massive depiction of a recumbent lion with the head of a king was carved for Khafre.

The Sphinx is carved from the bedrock of the Giza plateau, and it appears that the core blocks used to construct the king's valley temple were quarried from the layers of stone that run along the upper sides of this massive image.
Khafre

The lion was a royal symbol as well as being connected with the sun as a symbol of the horizon; the fusion of this powerful animal with the head of the pharaoh was an icon that survived and was often used throughout Egyptian history. The king’s head is on a smaller scale than the body. This appears to have been due to a defect in the stone; a weakness recognized by the sculptors who compensated by elongating the body.

Directly in front of the Sphinx is a separate temple dedicated to the worship of its cult, but very little is known about it since there are no Old Kingdom texts that refer to the Sphinx or its temple. The temple is similar to Khafre’s mortuary temple and has granite pillars forming a colonnade around a central courtyard. However, it is unique in that it has two sanctuaries—one on the east and one on the west—likely connected to the rising and setting sun.
The third of the major pyramids at Giza belongs to Mekaure. This is the smallest of the three, rising to a height of 65 meters (213 feet), but the complex preserved some of the most stunning examples of sculpture to survive from all of Egyptian history.

Mekaure’s pyramid chambers are more complex than those of Khafre and include a chamber carved with decorative panels and another chamber with six large niches. The burial chamber is lined with massive granite blocks.
His black stone sarcophagus, also carved with niched panels, was discovered inside, but was lost at sea as it was being transported to England.

Figure \(\PageIndex{40}\): King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen, 2490-2472 B.C.E., Greywacke, overall: 142.2 x 57.1 x 55.2 cm, 676.8 kg / 56 x 22 1/2 x 21 3/4 inches, 1492.1 pounds (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

Within Menkaure’s mortuary and valley temples, neither of which were completed before his death, excavation revealed a series of statues of the king.

The stunning diad of the king with his primary queen, Khamerernebty II (now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), as well as a number of triads showing the king being embraced by various deities, were discovered in the valley temple and were originally set up surrounding the open court.

This temple was still an active place of cult late in the Old Kingdom and was almost entirely rebuilt at the end of the 6th dynasty after it was heavily damaged by a flood.
King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen

by DR. AMY CALVERT

Serene ethereal beauty, raw royal power, and evidence of artistic virtuosity have rarely been simultaneously captured as well as in this breathtaking, nearly life-size statue of the pharaoh Menkaure and a queen. Smooth as silk, the meticulously finished surface of the dark stone captures the physical ideals of the time and creates a sense of eternity and immortality even today.

Figure \(\PageIndex{41}\): King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen, 2490–2472 B.C.E., greywacke, 142.2 x 57.1 x 55.2 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), photo: tutincommon (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Undoubtedly, the most iconic structures from Ancient Egypt are the massive and enigmatic Great Pyramids that stand on a natural stone shelf, now known as the Giza plateau, on the south-western edge of modern Cairo. The three primary pyramids at Giza were constructed during the height of a period known as the Old Kingdom and served as burial places, memorials, and places of worship for a series of deceased rulers—the largest belonging to King Khufu, the middle to his son Khafre, and the smallest of the three to his son Menkaure.
Pyramids are not stand-alone structures. Those at Giza formed only a part of a much larger complex that included a temple at the base of the pyramid itself, long causeways and corridors, small subsidiary pyramids, and a second temple (known as a valley temple) some distance from the pyramid. These Valley Temples were used to perpetuate the cult of the deceased king and were active places of worship for hundreds of years (sometimes much longer) after the king’s death. Images of the king were placed in these temples to serve as a focus for worship—several such images have been found in these contexts, including the magnificent seated statue of Khafre, now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.
On January 10, 1910, excavators under the direction of George Reisner, head of the joint Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Expedition to Egypt, uncovered an astonishing collection of statuary in the Valley Temple connected to the Pyramid of Menkaure. Menkaure’s pyramid had been explored in the 1830s (using dynamite, no less). His carved granite sarcophagus was removed (and subsequently lost at sea), and while the Pyramid Temple at the base was in only mediocre condition; the Valley Temple, was—happily—basically ignored.

Reisner had been excavating on the Giza plateau for several years at this point; his team had already explored the elite cemetery to the west of the Great Pyramid of Khufu before turning their attention to the Menkaure complex, most particularly the barely-touched Valley Temple.
In the southwest corner of the structure, the team discovered a magnificent cache of statuary carved in a smooth-grained dark stone called greywacke or schist. There were a number of triad statues—each showing 3 figures—the king, the fundamentally important goddess Hathor, and the personification of a nome (a geographic designation, similar to the modern idea of a region, district, or county). Hathor was worshiped in the pyramid temple complexes along with the supreme sun god Re and the god Horus, who was represented by the living king. The goddess’s name is actually 'Hwt-hor', which means “The House of Horus,” and she was connected to the wife of the living king and the mother of the future king. Hathor was also a fierce protector who guarded her father Re; as an “Eye of Re” (the title assigned to a group of dangerous goddesses), she could embody the intense heat of the sun and use that blazing fire to destroy his enemies.

There were 4 complete triads, one incomplete, and at least one other in a fragmentary condition. The precise meaning of these triads is uncertain. Reisner believed that there was one for each ancient Egyptian nome, meaning there would have originally been more than thirty of them. More recent scholarship, however, suggests that there were originally 8 triads, each connected with a major site associated with the cult of Hathor. Hathor’s prominence in the triads (she actually takes the central position in one of the sculptures) and her singular importance to kingship lends weight to this theory.

In addition to the triads, Reisner’s team also revealed the extraordinary dyad statue of Menkaure and a queen that is breathtakingly singular.
The two figures stand side-by-side on a simple, squared base and are supported by a shared back pillar. They both face to the front, although Menkaure’s head is noticeably turned to his right—this image was likely originally positioned within an architectural niche, making it appear as though they were emerging from the structure. The broad-shouldered, youthful body of the king is covered only with a traditional short pleated kilt, known as a shendjet, and his head sports the primary pharaonic insignia of the iconic striped nemes headdress (so well known from the mask of Tutankhamun) and an artificial royal beard. In his clenched fists, held straight down at his sides, Menkaure grasps ritual cloth rolls. His body is straight, strong, and eternally youthful with no signs of age. His facial features are remarkably individualized with prominent eyes, a fleshy nose, rounded cheeks, and full mouth with protruding lower lip.

Menkaure’s queen provides the perfect female counterpart to his youthful masculine virility. Sensuously modeled with a
beautifully proportioned body emphasized by a clinging garment, she articulates ideal mature feminine beauty. There is a sense of the individual in both faces. Neither Menkaure nor his queen are depicted in the purely idealized manner that was the norm for royal images. Instead, through the overlay of royal formality we see the depiction of a living person filling the role of pharaoh and the personal features of a particular individual in the representation of his queen.

Menkaure and his queen stride forward with their left feet—this is entirely expected for the king, as males in Egyptian sculpture almost always do so, but it is unusual for the female since they are generally depicted with feet together. They both look beyond the present and into timeless eternity, their otherworldly visage displaying no human emotion whatsoever.

The dyad was never finished—the area around the lower legs has not received a final polish, and there is no inscription. However, despite this incomplete state, the image was erected in the temple and was brightly painted—there are traces of red around the king’s ears and mouth and yellow on the queen’s face. The presence of paint atop the smooth, dark greywacke on a statue of the deceased king that was originally erected in his memorial temple courtyard brings an interesting suggestion—that the paint may have been intended to wear away through exposure and, over time, reveal the immortal, black-fleshed “Osiris” Menkaure (for more information on the symbolic associations of Egyptian materials, see Introduction to Egyptian Art—Materials).

Unusual for a pharaoh’s image, the king has no protective cobra (known as a uraeus) perched on his brow. This notable absence has led to the suggestion that both the king’s nemes and the queen’s wig were originally covered in precious metal and that the cobra would have been part of that addition.

Based on comparison with other images, there is no doubt that this sculpture shows Menkaure, but the identity of the queen is a different matter. She is clearly a royal female. She stands at nearly equal height with the king and, of the two of them, she is the one who is entirely frontal. In fact, it may be that this dyad is focused on the queen as its central figure rather than Menkaure. The prominence of the royal female—at equal height and frontal—in addition to the protective gesture she extends has suggested that, rather than one of Mekaure’s wives, this is actually his queen-mother. The function of the sculpture in any case was to ensure rebirth for the king in the Afterlife.

Additional resources:

This sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Educator resource from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Menkaure Pyramid Complex from the Giza Archives

The Seated Scribe

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

Seated cross-legged, with rolls of belly fat, this painted statue differs from the ideal statues of pharaohs.
Video \(\PageIndex{2}\): *Seated Scribe*, c. 2500 B.C.E., 4th Dynasty, Old Kingdom, painted limestone with rock crystal, magnesite, and copper/arsenic inlay for the eyes and wood for the nipples, found in Saqqara

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Middle and New Kingdom

New Kingdom pharaohs controlled vast wealth. Thebes was the religious center of the period, and Pharaohs built mortuary temples here and were buried in huge rock-cut tombs.

c. 2030 - 1070 B.C.E.

Temple of Amun-Re and the Hypostyle Hall, Karnak

by DR. ELIZABETH CUMMINS

The massive temple complex of Karnak was the principal religious center of the god Amun-Re in Thebes during the New
Kingdom (which lasted from 1550 until 1070 B.C.E.). The complex remains one of the largest religious complexes in the world. However, Karnak was not just one temple dedicated to one god—it held not only the main precinct to the god Amun-Re—but also the precincts of the gods Mut and Montu. Compared to other temple compounds that survive from ancient Egypt, Karnak is in a poor state of preservation but it still gives scholars a wealth of information about Egyptian religion and art. About the New Kingdom, Amun-Re, Mut, and Montu

“\textbf{The Most Select of Places}”

The site was first developed during the Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 B.C.E.) and was initially modest in scale but as new importance was placed on the city of Thebes, subsequent pharaohs began to place their own mark on Karnak. The main precinct alone would eventually have as many as twenty temples and chapels.\[1\] Karnak was known in ancient times as “The Most Select of Places” (Ipet-isut) and was not only the location of the cult image of Amun and a place for the god to dwell on earth but also a working estate for the priestly community who lived on site. Additional buildings included a sacred lake, kitchens, and workshops for the production of religious accoutrements.

The main temple of Amun-Re had two axes—one that went north/south and the other that extended east/west. The southern axis continued towards the temple of Luxor and was connected by an avenue of ram-headed sphinxes.

While the sanctuary was plundered for stone in ancient times, there are still a number of unique architectural features within this vast complex. For example, the tallest obelisk in Egypt stood at Karnak and was dedicated by the female
pharaoh Hatshepsut who ruled Egypt during the New Kingdom. Made of one piece of red granite, it originally had a matching obelisk that was removed by the Roman emperor Constantine and re-erected in Rome. Another unusual feature was the Festival Temple of Thutmose III, which had columns that represented tent poles, a feature this pharaoh was no doubt familiar with from his many war campaigns. What is an obelisk?

![Tent pole columns, Festival Temple of Thutmose III](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/SmartHistory%3A_Hospitality%3A_Hospitality-Pharaohs%3A_Highlighting%3A_Highlighting_Hatshepsut%3A_Highlighting_Hatshepsut_Hatshepsut_%005B1%5D%005D)

Figure \(\PageIndex{52}\): "Tent pole" columns, Festival Temple of Thutmose III, c. 1470-25 B.C.E., sandstone, mud brick, paint, Karnak, at Luxor, Egypt (photo: Dennis Jarvis, CC: BY-SA 2.0)

**Hypostyle hall**

One of the greatest architectural marvels of Karnak is the hypostyle hall built during the Ramesside period (a hypostyle hall is a space with a roof supported by columns). The hall has 134 massive sandstone columns with the center twelve columns standing at 69 feet. Like most of the temple decoration, the hall would have been brightly painted and some of this paint still exists on the upper portions of the columns and ceiling today. With the center of the hall taller than the spaces on either side, the Egyptians allowed for clerestory lighting (a section of wall that allowed light and air into the otherwise dark space below). In fact, the earliest evidence for clerestory lighting comes from Egypt. Not many ancient Egyptians would have had access to this hall, since the further one went into the temple, the more restricted access became.

Explain Rameesside and Clerestory
Temple as cosmos

Conceptually, temples in Egypt were connected to the idea of *zep tepi*, or “the first time,” the beginnings of the creation of the world. The temple was a reflection of this time, when the mound of creation emerged from the primeval waters. The pylons, or gateways in the temple represent the horizon, and as one moves further into the temple, the floor rises until it reaches the sanctuary of the god, giving the impression of a rising mound, like that during creation. The temple roof represented the sky and was often decorated with stars and birds. The columns were designed with lotus, papyrus, and palm plants in order to reflect the marsh-like environment of creation. The outer areas of Karnak, which was located near the Nile River, would flood during the annual inundation—an intentional effect by the ancient designers no doubt, in order to enhance the temple’s symbolism.\(^1\)
Video \(\PageIndex{3}\): Video from UNESCO/TBS

Google Maps Feature

Additional resources:

A digital resource from UCLA that provides an overview of the types of buildings and building phases of Karnak

The Karnak Great Hypostyle Project

Slide show detailing the excavation of the Mut Precinct at Karnak

Ancient Thebes with its Necropolis

by UNESCO and TBS

From temples on the east bank of the Nile to the Valley of the Kings, Thebes was a wonder of Egyptian Civilization.
Thebes, the city of the god Amon, was the capital of Egypt during the period of the Middle and New Kingdoms. With the temples and palaces at Karnak and Luxor, and the necropolises of the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens, Thebes is a striking testimony to Egyptian civilization at its height.

Standing Hippopotamus

by THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
Video (PageIndex(5)): *Standing Hippopotamus*, ca. 1961–1878 B.C.E., Egypt, Middle Kingdom, faience, 7 7/8" x 2 15/16" x 4 7/16" / 20 cm x 7.5 cm x 11.2 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Video from The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**Mortuary Temple and Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut**

*by* DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \(\PageIndex{6}\): Mortuary Temple and Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut, c. 1479-58 B.C.E., New Kingdom, Egypt

Google Maps Feature

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
The tomb-chapel of Nebamun

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The British Museum contains 11 fragments of wall painting, which are some of the most famous images of Egyptian art. The fragments come from the now lost tomb-chapel of Nebamun, an ancient Egyptian scribe or the “scribe and grain accountant in the granary of divine offerings,” in the Temple of Amun at Karnak. Nebamun died c. 1350 B.C.E., a generation or so before Tutankhamun. His name is damaged but he was almost certainly called Nebamun.

“Antiquity’s equivalent to Michelangelo”

The tomb-paintings were discovered by the local agent Henry Salt in Thebes and acquired by the Museum in the 1820s. The location of the tomb from which they came is still not known with any certainty, but it is thought to be in the northern part of the necropolis in the area known as Dra Abu el-Naga. Stylistically, the magnificent wall paintings can be dated to either the final years of the reign of Amenhotep III (1390-1352 B.C.E.) or the early years of his successor. The fragments were constantly on display until the late 1990s. Since then, the fragile wall-paintings have been meticulously conserved, securing their condition for at least the next fifty years.

The project has provided numerous new insights into the superb technique of the painters. Their exuberant compositions, astonishing depictions of animal life and unparalleled handling of textures have caused one art historian to call them “antiquity’s equivalent to Michelangelo.” New research and scholarship have enabled new connections to be made between the fragments, allowing scholars to gain a better understanding of their original locations in the tomb. They will now be re-displayed together for the first time in a setting designed to recreate their original aesthetic impact and to evoke their original position in a small intimate chapel.
The paintings show scenes of daily life and include images of banquets, agriculture, animal husbandry, hunting and scenes of offerings. The quality of the drawing and composition is outstanding, and the superbly detailed treatment of the animals makes these some of the finest paintings to survive from ancient Egypt.

**A place of commemoration**

Nebamun’s tomb-chapel was a place for people to come and commemorate Nebamun and his wife after his death with prayers and offerings. Nebamun himself was buried somewhere beneath the floor of the innermost room of the tomb-chapel in a hidden burial chamber. The beautiful paintings, which decorated the wall, not only showed how Nebamun wanted his life to be remembered but what he wanted in his life after death.

Building a tomb-chapel was expensive and would have only been done by the wealthy. The majority of ancient Egyptians would have been buried in cemeteries.

**How the tomb-chapel was built and used**

Nebamun’s tomb-chapel was cut into the desert hills opposite the city of Thebes (modern Luxor and Karnak). Workmen would have cut the tomb out of the rock using flint tools and copper-alloy chisels. The walls and ceilings of the tomb were then covered in a layer of mud plaster, followed by a layer of white plaster. This provided a smooth surface for painting.

The tomb-chapel was painted by a team of artists. They first sketched out the designs and figures before painting the final pattern. Sometimes the sketches can still be seen, showing how the artists changed their minds. The artists used black, white, red, yellow, blue and green paints.

The tomb-chapel probably contained three sections: an outer chamber, an inner chamber and an underground burial chamber, which was sealed once Nebamun and his wife had been buried. Outside the tomb-chapel a courtyard was cut into the hillside. The walls of the chapel facade were decorated with rows of pottery cones stamped with the names and titles of the owner.
Suggested readings:


Explore the tomb-chapel of Nebamun in a 3D interactive animation at The British Museum

© Trustees of the British Museum

Paintings from the Tomb-chapel of Nebamun

*by THE BRITISH MUSEUM*

The fragments from the wall painting in the tomb-chapel of Nebamun are keenly observed vignettes of Nebamun and his family enjoying both work and play. Some concern the provision of the funerary cult that was celebrated in the tomb-chapel, some show scenes of Nebamun’s life as an elite official, and others show him and his family enjoying life for all eternity, as in the famous scene of the family hunting in the marshes. Together they decorated the small tomb-chapel with vibrant and engaging images of an elite lifestyle that Nebamun hoped would continue in the afterlife.

**Hunting in the marshes**

![Figure](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Anci…)

*Figure \(\PageIndex{58}\): Nebamun fowling in the marshes, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun, c. 1350 B.C.E., 18th Dynasty, paint on plaster, 83 x 98 cm, Thebes © Trustees of the British Museum*

Nebamun is shown hunting birds from a small boat in the marshes of the Nile with his wife Hatshepsut and their young daughter. Such scenes had already been traditional parts of tomb-chapel decoration for hundreds of years and show the
dead tomb-owner “enjoying himself and seeing beauty,” as the hieroglyphic caption here says.

This is more than a simple image of recreation. Fertile marshes were seen as a place of rebirth and eroticism. Hunting animals could represent Nebamun’s triumph over the forces of nature as he was reborn. The huge striding figure of Nebamun dominates the scene, forever happy and forever young, surrounded by the rich and varied life of the marsh.

There was originally another half of the scene which showed Nebamun spearing fish. This half of the wall is lost, apart from two old photographs of small fragments of Nebamun and his young son. The painters have captured the scaly and shiny quality of the fish.

A tawny cat catches birds among the papyrus stems. Cats were family pets, but in artistic depictions like this they could also represent the Sun-god hunting the enemies of light and order. His unusual gilded eye hints at the religious meanings of this scene.

![Cat catching birds in the papyrus clump (detail)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Anci...)

Figure 4.4: Cat catching birds in the papyrus clump (detail), from the Fowling in the Marshes, 18th Dynasty, Tomb of Nebamun, from the tomb of Nebanum, c. 1350 B.C.E., 18th Dynasty, paint on plaster, Thebes © The Trustees of the British Museum

The artists have filled every space with lively details. The marsh is full of lotus flowers and Plain Tiger butterflies. They are freely and delicately painted, suggesting the pattern and texture of their wings.
Nebamun’s Garden

Figure \(\PageIndex{60}\): *Nebamun’s garden*, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun, c.1350 B.C.E., 18th Dynasty, paint on plaster, 64 cm high, Thebes, Egypt © Trustees of the British Museum

Nebamun’s garden in the afterlife is not unlike the earthly gardens of wealthy Egyptians. The pool is full of birds and fish, and surrounded by borders of flowers and shady rows of trees. The fruit trees include sycamore-figs, date-palms and date-palms—the dates are shown with different degrees of ripeness.

On the right side of the pool a goddess leans out of a tree and offers fruit and drinks to Nebamun (now lost). The artists accidentally painted her skin red at first but then repainted it yellow, the correct color for a goddess’ skin. On the left, a sycamore-fig tree speaks and greets Nebamun as the owner of the garden; its words are recorded in the hieroglyphs.

Figure \(\PageIndex{61}\): Pool (detail) Nebamun’s garden, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun, c.1350 B.C.E., 18th Dynasty, paint on plaster, 64 cm high, Thebes, Egypt © Trustees of the British Museum
Here the pool is shown from above, with three rows of trees arranged around its edges. The waves of the pool were painted with a darker blue pigment; much of this has been lost, like the green on the trees and bushes.

**Surveying the fields**

![Surveying the fields](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/Section_1.03.05%3A_Ancient_Egypt%27s_Waters%2C_Tobacco%2C%20and%20Rice%2CSmartHistory.png)

Figure \(\PageIndex{62}\): Surveying the fields for Nebamun, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun, c. 1350 B.C.E., 18th Dynasty, paint on plaster, 106.7 x 45.8 cm, Thebes, Egypt © Trustees of the British Museum

Nebamun was the accountant in charge of grain at the great Temple of Amun at Karnak. This scene from his tomb-chapel shows officials inspecting fields. A farmer checks the boundary marker of the field.

 Nearby, two chariots for the party of officials wait under the shade of a sycamore-fig tree. Other smaller fragments from this wall are now in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, Germany and show the grain being harvested and processed.

![Old man assessing crops](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/Section_1.03.05%3A_Ancient_Egypt%27s_Waters%2C_Tobacco%2C%20and%20Rice%2CSmartHistory.png)

Figure \(\PageIndex{63}\): Old man assessing crops (detail), *Surveying the fields for Nebamun*, Tomb-chapel of
The old farmer is shown balding, badly shaven, poorly dressed, and with a protruding navel. He is taking an oath saying: “As the Great God who is in the sky endures, the boundary-stone is exact!”

“The Chief of the Measurers of the Granary,” (mostly lost) holds a rope decorated with the head of Amun’s sacred ram for measuring the god’s fields. After Nebamun died, the rope’s head was hacked out, but later, perhaps in Tutankhamun’s reign, someone clumsily restored it with mud-plaster and redrew it.

**Nebamun’s cattle**

![Nebamun’s cattle](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Anci…)

This fragment is part of a wall showing Nebamun inspecting flocks of geese and herds of cattle. Hieroglyphs describe the scene and record what the farmers say as they squabble in the queue. The alternating colors and patterns of cattle create a superb sense of animal movement.

![Cattle (detail), Nebamun’s cattle](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Anci…)

![QR Code](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Anci…)
The herdsman is telling the farmer in front of him in the queue:

Come on! Get away! Don’t speak in the presence of the praised one! He detests people talking .... Pass on in quiet and in order ... He knows all affairs, does the scribe and counter of grain of [Amun], Neb[amun].

The name of the god Amun has been hacked out in this caption where it appears in Nebamun’s name and title. Shortly after Nebamun died, King Akhenaten (1352–1336 B.C.E.) had Amun’s name erased from monuments as part of his religious reforms.

Nebamun’s geese

This scene is part of a wall showing Nebamun inspecting flocks of geese and herds of cattle. He watches as farmers drive the animals towards him; his scribes (secretaries) write down the number of animals for his records. Hieroglyphs describe the scene and record what the farmers say as they squabble in the queue.
Figure \(\PageIndex{67}\): Geese (detail), *Nebamun’s Geese*, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun, c. 1350 B.C.E., 18th Dynasty, paint on plaster, whole fragment: 71 x 115.5 cm, Thebes © Trustees of the British Museum

This scribe holds a palette (pen-box) under his arm and presents a roll of papyrus to Nebamun. He is well dressed and has small rolls of fat on his stomach, indicating his superior position in life. Beside him are chests for his records and a bag containing his writing equipment.

Farmers bow down and make gestures of respect towards Nebamun. The man behind them holds a stick and tells them: “Sit down and don’t speak!” The farmers’ geese are painted as a huge and lively gaggle, some pecking the ground and some flapping their wings.

**A feast for Nebamun (top half)**
An entire wall of the tomb-chapel showed a feast in honor of Nebamun. Naked serving-girls and servants wait on his friends and relatives. Married guests sit in pairs on fine chairs, while the young women turn and talk to each other. This erotic scene of relaxation and wealth is something for Nebamun to enjoy for all eternity. The richly-dressed guests are entertained by dancers and musicians, who sit on the ground playing and clapping. The words of their song in honor of Nebamun are written above them:

\[
\text{The earth-god has caused} \\
\text{his beauty to grow in every body...} \\
\text{the channels are filled with water anew,} \\
\text{and the land is flooded with love of him.}
\]

Some of the musicians look out of the paintings, showing their faces frontally. This is very unusual in Egyptian art, and gives a sense of liveliness to these lower-class women, who are less formally drawn than the wealthy guests. The young dancers are sinuously drawn and are naked apart from their jewelry.

A rack of large wine jars is decorated with grapes, vines and garlands of flowers. Many of the guests also wear garlands and smell lotus flowers. All the guests wear elaborate linen clothes. The artists have painted the cloth as if it were transparent, to show that it is very fine. These elegant sensual dresses fall in loose folds around the guests’ bodies.

Men and women’s skins are painted in different colors: the men are tanned and the women are paler. In one place the artists altered the drawing of these wooden stools and corrected their first sketch with white paint.

**Servant’s bringing offerings**
A procession of simply-dressed servants bring offerings of food to Nebamun, including sheaves of grain and animals from the desert. Tomb-chapels were built so that people could come and make offerings in memory of the dead, and this a common scene on their walls. The border at the bottom shows that this scene was the lowest one on this wall.

One servant holds two desert hares by their ears. The animals have wonderfully textured fur and long whiskers. The superb draughtsmanship and composition make this standard scene very fresh and lively.

The artists have even varied the servants’ simple clothes. The folds of each kilt are different. With one of these kilts, the artist changed his mind and painted a different set of folds over his first version, which is visible through the white paint.
Suggested readings:


Explore the tomb-chapel of Nebamun in a 3D interactive animation at The British Museum

© Trustees of the British Museum

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**A bottle and a toy: Objects from daily life**

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The wall paintings from Nebamun’s tomb-chapel depict an idealized vision of daily ancient Egyptian life. Much less is known about the lives of the majority of society. The study of human remains in poor cemeteries is often the only way to learn about the short lives of most ancient Egyptians. Many of the objects that remain belonged to the wealthy and survived only because they were buried in tombs. They provide a glimpse of these elite people’s lavish lifestyles.

**Glass bottle in the form of a fish**

![Glass bottle in the form of a fish](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Anci...)

Glass vessels seem to have been primarily functional rather than ritual objects; their main use was as containers for cosmetics or precious oils. However, in this case the fish design might hint at some further meaning, complementing its beauty as an elite personal item.

The fish represented is a Nile tilapia fish, which hatches and shelters her young in her mouth. The emergence of live offspring from the tilapia’s mouth caused it to be used as a symbol of rebirth and regeneration; it was frequently worn as an amulet.
This is the most complete and spectacular example of several surviving fish-shaped glass vessels made around this period. It was found under the floor in a house at Tell el-Amarna, where it may have been buried by its owner.

Glass vessels from the New Kingdom (1550-1070 B.C.E.) are highly colorful objects, and glass was often used as a more versatile and less expensive substitute for semiprecious stones. This fish was made by trailing molten glass over a core made of a clay mixture. Next, colored rods of glass were wrapped around the body and dragged with a tool to create a fish-scale pattern. The body was then smoothed, the eyes and fins added and the core scraped out.

**Wooden toy cat**

![Wooden toy cat](image)

Figure (PagIndex(74)): Wooden toy cat, c. 1550-1070 B.C.E., 5.3 x 11.7 x 3 cm, Thebes, © Trustees of the British Museum. Rock crystal inlays are used for the eyes, and the teeth are of bronze. The lower jaw can be moved, using a string (modern) which runs through a hole which runs through from the top of the head.

Cats may have been kept as pets as early as the fourth millennium B.C.E. Two wild species of cat lived in Egypt: the jungle cat and the African wild cat. By the late first millennium B.C.E. cats were bred on an industrial scale for use in the cult of the cat goddess Bastet.

From the Twelfth Dynasty, cats are shown in tomb decoration, seated beneath the chair of the deceased, or accompanying him on a hunt in the marshes. There is a fine example of the latter type of scene in the tomb of Nebamun, showing a ginger cat catching birds in its mouth and with all four paws at the same time. Such hunting scenes may also represent the struggle between civilized humans and the forces of chaos, shown as wild fowl.

The cat had a similar role on the divine plane. In the funerary text called the Litany of Re, the sun god appears as a cat and battles the snake Apep. This serpent, a manifestation of the forces of chaos, attacked the solar boat as it passed through the night sky. The god overcame Apep by cutting him in two with a knife, allowing the sun to continue its journey to be reborn at dawn.

**Additional resources:**


Learn more about Egyptian objects on the British Museum website

© Trustees of the British Museum

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**House Altar depicting Akhenaten, Nefertiti and Three of their Daughters**

by [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/1.03.02)

and [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/1.03.02)

Video \(\text{Page}\{7\}\): House Altar depicting Akhenaten, Nefertiti and Three of their Daughters, limestone, New Kingdom, Amarna period, 18th dynasty, c.1350 BCE (Ägyptisches Museum/Neues Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:

[Images of ancient Egyptian artifacts and a person looking at them]

https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Anci...
Figure \(\PageIndex{75}\): More Smarthistory images…

**Portrait Head of Queen Tiye**

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Figure \(\PageIndex{8}\): *Portrait Head of Queen Tiye with a Crown of Two Feathers*, c. 1355 B.C.E., Amarna Period, Dynasty 18, New Kingdom, Egypt, yew wood, lapis lazuli, silver, gold, faience, 22.5 cm high (Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection at the Neues Museum, Berlin)

**Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:**
Thutmose, *Model Bust of Queen Nefertiti*

by [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/Model_Bust_of_Queen_Nefertiti) and [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/Model_Bust_of_Queen_Nefertiti)

Found in an artist's studio, this stunning bust exemplifies a change in style, and may have been an early prototype.
In 2009, the refurbished Neues Museum in Berlin celebrated its reopening, with the bust of Nefertiti prominently displayed as one of its main attractions. The celebration coincided with one of the Egyptian government’s repeated pleas for the official return of the bust to Egypt. The museum has staunchly refused to give up the sculpture, asserting that the bust was acquired legally by the German archaeologist Ludwig Borchardt in 1912. Borchardt had excavated it along with several other objects from the studio of the ancient Egyptian sculptor Thutmose, and had brought his finds to Germany as part of an agreement with the Egyptian Antiquities Service. While there is no proof that Borchardt’s dealings were explicitly illegal, as early as 1925, the Egyptian government began to take issue with Germany’s possession of valuable antiquities. They began imposing sanctions, and the bust has been the source of tension between the two nations ever since.

This controversy relates to a general growing public awareness about the provenance—and politics—of antiquities held in European and American museums. In 2016, Nora al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles, two artists from Germany, made a bold statement about these issues by staging an event they called “NefertitiHack.” They secretly mapped the sculpture using a consumer-grade 3-D scanning device, and then released the data openly under a Creative Commons license. The artists’ intention was “to inspire a critical reassessment of today’s conditions and to overcome the colonial notion of possession in Germany,” according to their website.

Many groups have advocated for using digitally-produced replicas either as stand-ins for objects that are returned to
their places of origin, or vice versa—as ways of offering highly accurate replicas in place of the original. The sharing of
data between institutions and groups who lay claim to objects has also been suggested as a way to ease tensions over
restitution. Nelles and al-Badri’s project is a critical statement about the growing questions around repatriation and public
access to objects via 3-D models and other data, as the Neues Museum does not allow photography or publicly share its
own 3-D model of the bust.

Nora al-Badri, one of the artists behind NefertitiHack, stated:

“The head of Nefertiti represents all the other millions of stolen and looted artifacts all over the world currently
happening, for example, in Syria, Iraq, and in Egypt…Archaeological artifacts as a cultural memory originate for
the most part from the Global South; however, a vast number of important objects can be found in Western
museums and private collections. We should face the fact that the colonial structures continue to exist today
and still produce their inherent symbolic struggles.”

Over a century after it was excavated, the bust of Nefertiti remains a flashpoint for institutions and the public, driving us
to consider the ways in which objects and their data are acquired, displayed, and shared.

Backstory by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

Additional resources:

Image of Nefertiti, photo: Philip Pikart (CC BY-SA 3.0)

NefertitiHack website

Artists’ video of the scanning process in the Neues Museum

“Swiping a Priceless Antiquity ... With a Scanner and a 3-D Printer,” The New York Times, March 1, 2016

“Artists Covertly Scan Bust of Nefertiti and Release the Data for Free Online,” Hyperallergic, February 19, 2016


“German foundation refuses to return Nefertiti bust,” Reuters, January 24, 2011

“A 3,500-Year-Old Queen Causes a Rift Between Germany and Egypt,” The New York Times, October 18, 2009

Tutankhamun’s tomb (innermost coffin and death mask)

by DR. ELIZABETH CUMMINS
Nearly lost to history

Tutankhamun was only the age of nine when he became king of Egypt during the 18th dynasty of the New Kingdom (c. 1332–1323 B.C.E.). His story would have been lost to history if it were not for the discovery of his tomb in 1922 by the archaeologist Howard Carter in the Valley of the Kings. His nearly intact tomb held a wealth of objects that give us unique insights into this period of ancient Egyptian history.
Tutankhamun ruled after the Amarna age, when the pharaoh Akhenaten, Tutankhamun’s probable father, turned the religious attention of the kingdom to the worship of the god Aten, the sun disc. Akhenaten moved his capital city to the site of Akhetaten (also known as Amarna), in Middle Egypt—far from the previous pharaoh’s capital. After Akhenaten’s death and the rule of a short-lived pharaoh, Smenkhkare, Tutankhamen shifted the focus of the country’s worship back to the god Amun and returned the religious center back to Thebes.

Tutankhamun married his half-sister, Ankhesenamun, but they did not produce an heir. This left the line of succession unclear. Tutankhamun died at the young age of eighteen, leading many scholars to speculate on the manner of his death—chariot accident, murder by blow to the head, and even a hippopotamus attack! The answer is still unclear. Tutankhamun’s much-older advisor (and possible step-grandfather), Ay, married the widowed Ankhesenamun and became pharaoh.

The tomb

![Valley of the Kings, Egypt](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/1.03%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/1.03.04%3A_Tutankhamun%27s_Tomb/Valley_of_the_Kings_Egypt.png)

During the early twentieth century, Howard Carter, a British Egyptologist, excavated for many years in the Valley of the Kings—a royal burial ground located on the west bank of the ancient city of Thebes. He was running out of money to support his archaeological digs when he asked for funding for one more season from his financial backer, the fifth Earl of Carnarvon. Lord Carnarvon granted him one more year—and what a year it was!
At the beginning of November 1922, Carter came upon the first of twelve steps of the entrance that led to the tomb of Tutankhamun. He quickly recovered the steps and sent a telegram to Carnarvon in England so they could open the tomb together. Carnarvon departed for Egypt immediately and on November 26, 1922, they made a hole in the entrance of the antechamber in order to look in. Carter states:

At first I could see nothing, the hot air escaping from the chamber causing the candle flame to flicker, but presently, as my eyes grew accustomed to the lights, details of the room within emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues, and gold –everywhere the glint of gold.

The task of cataloging the finds was an immense undertaking for the team. Carter spent a decade systematically recording the finds and having them photographed.
The innermost coffin

Tutankhamun’s sarcophagus (a box-like stone container) held not one but three coffins in which to hold the body of the king. The outer two coffins were crafted in wood and covered in gold along with many semiprecious stones, such as lapis lazuli and turquoise. The inner coffin, however, was made of solid gold. When Howard Carter first came upon this coffin, it was not the shiny golden image we see in the Egyptian museum today (below). In his excavation notes, Carter states, it was “covered with a thick black pitch-like layer which extended from the hands down to the ankles (top image). This was obviously an anointing liquid which had been poured over the coffin during the burial ceremony and in great quantity (some two buckets full).”

The image of the pharaoh is that of a god. The gods were thought to have skin of gold, bones of silver, and hair of lapis lazuli—so the king is shown here in his divine form in the afterlife. He holds the crook and flail, symbols of the king’s right to rule. The goddesses Nekhbet (vulture) and Wadjet (cobra), inlaid with semiprecious stones, stretch their wings across his torso. Beneath these goddesses are two more—Isis and Nephthys—etched into the gold lid.
The death mask of Tutankhamun

Figure \(`\PageIndex{85}`\): Death Mask from innermost coffin, Tutankhamun’s tomb, New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty, c. 1323 B.C.E., gold with inlay of enamel and semiprecious stones (Egyptian Museum, Cairo) (photo: Bjørn Christian Tørrissen, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The death mask (above) is considered one of the masterpieces of Egyptian art. It originally rested directly on the shoulders of the mummy inside the innermost gold coffin. It is constructed of two sheets of gold that were hammered together and weighs 22.5 pounds (10.23 kg). Tutankhamen is depicted wearing the striped nemes headdress.
(the striped head-cloth typically worn by pharaohs in ancient Egypt) with the goddesses Nekhbet and Wadjet depicted again protecting his brow. He also wears a false beard that further connects him to the image of a god as with the inner coffin. He wears a broad collar, which ends in terminals shaped as falcon heads. The back of the mask is covered with Spell 151b from the Book of the Dead, which the Egyptians used as a road map for the afterlife. This particular spell protects the various limbs of Tutankhamun as he moves into the underworld.

\[1\]

\[2\]

**Additional resources:**

- The Griffin Institute’s digital archive of the excavation of Tutankhamun’s tomb—including all of Carter’s handwritten notes, plans, and photographs
- Theban Mapping Project
- Tutankhamun’s Funeral on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History


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**Head of Tutankhamun**

by **THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART**

At only 6 years old, Tutankhamun is crowned pharaoh by the god Amun-Ra.
Video: Head of Tutankhamun, c. 1336–1327 B.C.E., New Kingdom, Amarna Period, indurated limestone, 6 3/4" x 6 5/16" x 9 5/16" / 17.2 cm x 16 cm x 23.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Video from The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Hunefer's Judgement in the presence of Osiris

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM
Video \(\PageIndex{11}\): Hunefer’s Judgement in the presence of Osiris, Book of the Dead of Hunefer, 19th Dynasty, New Kingdom, c. 1275 B.C.E., papyrus, Thebes, Egypt (British Museum). Speakers: Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

Erratum: near the end of the video we say that Nephthys and Anubis are siblings; this is not correct.

**Hunefer: An ancient Egyptian official**

Hunefer and his wife Nasha lived during the Nineteenth Dynasty, in around 1310 B.C.E.. He was a “Royal Scribe” and “Scribe of Divine Offerings.” He was also “Overseer of Royal Cattle,” and the steward of King Sety I. These titles indicate that he held prominent administrative offices and would have been close to the king. The location of his tomb is not known, but he may have been buried at Memphis.

Hunefer’s high status is reflected in the fine quality of his Book of the Dead, which was specially produced for him. This, and a Ptah-Sokar-Osiris figure, inside which the papyrus was found, are the only objects which can be ascribed to Hunefer. The papyrus of Hunefer is characterized by its good state of preservation and the large, and clear vignettes (illustrations) are beautifully drawn and painted. The vignette illustrating the “Opening of the Mouth” ritual is one of the most famous pieces of papyrus in The British Museum collection, and gives a great deal of information about this part of the funeral.
Page from the Book of the Dead of Hunefer

The centerpiece of the upper scene is the mummy of Hunefer, shown supported by the god Anubis (or a priest wearing a jackal mask). Hunefer’s wife and daughter mourn, and three priests perform rituals. The two priests with white sashes are carrying out the Opening of the Mouth ritual. The white building at the right is a representation of the tomb, complete with portal doorway and small pyramid. Both these features can be seen in real tombs of this date from Thebes. To the left of the tomb is a picture of the stela which would have stood to one side of the tomb entrance. Following the normal conventions of Egyptian art, it is shown much larger than normal size, in order that its content (the deceased worshipping Osiris, together with a standard offering formula) is absolutely legible.

At the right of the lower scene is a table bearing the various implements needed for the Opening of the Mouth ritual. At the left is shown a ritual, where the foreleg of a calf, cut off while the animal is alive, is offered. The animal was then sacrificed. The calf is shown together with its mother, who might be interpreted as showing signs of distress.

Page from the Book of the Dead of Ani

The center of the upper scene is the mummy of Ani, shown supported by the god Anubis (or a priest wearing a jackal mask). Ani’s wife and daughter mourn, and three priests perform rituals. The two priests with white sashes are carrying out the Opening of the Mouth ritual. The white building at the right is a representation of the tomb, complete with portal doorway and small pyramid. Both these features can be seen in real tombs of this date from Thebes. To the left of the tomb is a picture of the stela which would have stood to one side of the tomb entrance. Following the normal conventions of Egyptian art, it is shown much larger than normal size, in order that its content (the deceased worshipping Osiris, together with a standard offering formula) is absolutely legible.

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The scene reads from left to right. To the left, Anubis brings Hunefer into the judgement area. Anubis is also shown supervizing the judgement scales. Hunefer’s heart, represented as a pot, is being weighed against a feather, the symbol of Maat, the established order of things, in this context meaning ‘what is right’. The ancient Egyptians believed that the heart was the seat of the emotions, the intellect and the character, and thus represented the good or bad aspects of a person’s life. If the heart did not balance with the feather, then the dead person was condemned to non-existence, and consumption by the ferocious “devourer,” the strange beast shown here which is part-crocodile, part-lion, and part-hippopotamus.

However, as a papyrus devoted to ensuring Hunefer’s continued existence in the Afterlife is not likely to depict this outcome, he is shown to the right, brought into the presence of Osiris by his son Horus, having become “true of voice” or “justified.” This was a standard epithet applied to dead individuals in their texts. Osiris is shown seated under a canopy, with his sisters Isis and Nephthys. At the top, Hunefer is shown adoring a row of deities who supervise the judgement.

**Suggested readings:**


[This work at The British Museum](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Anci…)

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![Image 1](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Anci…)

![Image 2](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Anci…)

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Ptolemaic

After the death of Alexander the Great’s heirs, his conquests were divided among his generals. The Ptolemaic dynasty begins in 305 B.C.E., when one of Alexander’s generals became Ptolemy I of Egypt.

332 - 30 B.C.E.

Egyptian mummy portraits

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

A portrait shows what an individual would have looked like. Ancient Egyptians did not make much use of portraits; inscriptions containing the name and titles of an individual were used for identification purposes instead. Portraits were, however, important in Roman art. They were placed in tombs as a memorial of family members.

This type of portrait appeared in Egypt in the first century C.E., and remained popular for around 200 years. Egyptian mummy portraits were placed on the outside of the cartonnage coffin over the head of the individual or were carefully
wrapped into the mummy bandages. They were painted on a wooden board at a roughly lifelike scale. It is possible to date some mummies on the basis of the hairstyles, jewelry and clothes worn in the portrait, and to identify members of a family by their physical similarities.

**Mummy portrait of a man**

Most mummy portraits that have survived have unfortunately become separated from the mummies to which they were attached. Because of this we rarely know the identities of the subjects.

![Mummy portrait of a man](image)

The subject of this portrait, painted in encaustic on limewood, appears to be a man in his fifties or sixties of strikingly Roman appearance. He is dressed in a tunic with a violet stripe, or clavus, and a thick folded mantle. The hair is brushed forward and cropped in the style of court portraits of the Trajanic period (98-117 C.E.). Pink has been used to highlight his nose and lips, and dark brown to indicate shading and the contours of the face. The portrait gives the impression of age, authority and austerity. These characteristics were very important in Rome, and are here represented in a very Roman manner.

The accuracy of these portraits has often been questioned. Techniques employed by doctors to plan delicate facial
surgery have been used to compare the actual appearance of several mummies with their portraits. These techniques have helped prove that the portrait did indeed show the person as they appeared during life. Of course, there was still some element of artistic license; for example, the mummy of Artimedorus appeared to be much more heavily built than he seemed in his portrait.

Mummy portrait of a woman

![Mummy portrait of a woman](image)

Figure \(\PageIndex{90}\): Mummy portrait of a woman, c. 55-70 C.E., 41.6 x 21.5 cm, Hawara, Egypt, © Trustees of the British Museum

Additional resources:


© Trustees of the British Museum

Faiyum mummy portraits

by THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
Video \( \PageIndex{12} \): Y.Z. Kami on Egyptian Mummy Portraits, "Always in front of a human face you have an emotional reaction. Video from The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Additional resources:

- Portrait of the Boy Eutyches at The Metropolitan Museum of Art
- Roman Egypt on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History
- Art of the Roman Provinces, 1–500 A.D. on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Decoding the Rosetta Stone

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS
Multilingualism along the Nile

by LUIGI PRADA

Figure 1: This bilingual papyrus containing magical spells and recipes dates from the early third century A.D. and is written in both Greek and Demotic. In some passages, the Greek text is also transliterated into Demotic, and vice versa. London Magical Papyrus, A.D. 200–225, Romano-Egyptian. Papyrus and ink, 9 7/16 × 33 5/8 in. The British Museum, EA10070.2. On loan from the Trustees of the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Featured in the exhibition Beyond the Nile: Egypt and the Classical World

When we think of the language of ancient Egypt, the first thing that springs to mind is hieroglyphs carved on temple and tomb walls, the expression of a monolithic and unchangeable culture. Yet this could not be further from the truth. The civilization of ancient Egypt was much more dynamic and open to innovation than we normally give it credit for, and so was its linguistic complexity. Ancient Egyptian has one of the longest histories of written attestation of all world
languages. First recorded around 3200 B.C., it gradually disappeared in the Middle Ages under the pressure of Arabic—a language that is not linguistically related to ancient Egyptian and is today Egypt’s national language.

When we think of the changes that occurred in the English language between the time of Shakespeare and today, over a period of just four centuries, it is easy to imagine what dramatic transformations ancient Egyptian underwent over its own history, spanning four millennia.

**About the Ancient Egyptian language**

Scholars divide the ancient Egyptian language into five historical phases:

- **Old Egyptian**—attested in the third millennium B.C.
- **Middle Egyptian**—originating in the first half of the second millennium B.C., it later remained in use as the classical phase of the Egyptian language for most official, ritual, and literary texts
- **Late Egyptian**—in use in the second half of the second millennium and the first half of the first millennium B.C.
- **Demotic**—attested from the seventh century B.C. to fifth century A.D.
- **Coptic**—documented from approximately the second century A.D. to the tenth century A.D., though it still remains in use as the liturgical language of the Egyptian Coptic Church

Ancient Egyptian could also be written in a variety of different scripts, which include:

- **Hieroglyphs**—mostly used to write Old and Middle Egyptian texts

![Hieroglyphs](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Anci…)

Figure \(\PageIndex{92}\): Hieroglyphs. Detail from the Temple of Seti I, Abydos, Egypt. Photo courtesy of and © Luigi Prada

- **Hieratic**—a cursive script typically written on portable media such as papyrus and used for Old, Middle, and Late Egyptian alike
• **Demotic**—an even more cursive script used for writing Demotic (the same term being used for both the language phase and the script)

• **Coptic**—the Greek alphabet with the addition of a few letters for noting sounds that are specific to Egyptian (employed for Coptic—again, using the same word for both the language and the writing)
This all makes for a rather complex linguistic landscape, especially when we consider that, in the latter phases of ancient Egyptian history, several of the aforementioned language phases and scripts were in use at the same time. Nor was Egypt unaccustomed to foreign languages. In the exhibition Beyond the Nile: Egypt and the Classical World, the visitor had the opportunity to observe a number of written artifacts illustrating the outcome of language contact between Egypt and peoples from the Aegean and Roman world.

**Intellectual and linguistic exchange**

The so-called London Medical Papyrus is a manuscript dating from Egypt’s Eighteenth Dynasty, about 1400 to 1300 B.C. It contains a collection of remedies—consisting of both medical recipes and magical spells—for the treatment of various conditions, including swelling, skin diseases, eye ailments, bleeding, and burns. The text is written in hieratic (script) and composed in Middle Egyptian (language) but, remarkably, a number of healing spells in the section concerned with dermatology are not in Egyptian. As the papyrus itself points out, they are in fact in *djed en khashy*, that is, “foreign language,” here transliterated in hieratic. One of the foreign languages used in this section of the text is that of Keftw, the ancient Egyptian name for the island of Crete.
Throughout human history, societies ancient and modern have been fascinated with the culture of faraway lands—often perceived as a “secret knowledge.” The ancient Egyptians were no exception, and it is thus not surprising that they should have chosen a foreign language as a special linguistic vehicle for magical incantations. The presence of Cretan, the language of the Minoan civilization, in this papyrus shows that the links between pharaonic Egypt and the Aegean area in pre-Hellenic times went much further than trade or the visual arts would suggest (as witnessed in the Minoan-style frescoes of Avaris, in the Egyptian Delta), and that they also included intellectual and linguistic exchanges.

Moving eight centuries forward, to Egypt’s Late Period and its Twenty-sixth Dynasty (664–525 B.C.), the presence of an increasing number of people from the Aegean world in Egypt, and especially in its Delta and in the area of the ancient capital of Memphis, was then a fait accompli. Arriving mainly for commercial and military reasons (many served as mercenaries in the Egyptian army), these communities included both Greek and non-Hellenic peoples, such as the Carians, from southwest modern-day Turkey.

The funerary stela here pictured records the burial of a Carian woman named Píabrm, pictured in the bottom register, lying on a funerary bed. Yet the making of her stela, and especially the reliefs in the other registers, reveals how these Carian immigrants adapted themselves to the customs and beliefs of their new country while also retaining their own traditions and language.
The top and middle registers sport deities from the Egyptian pantheon such as Osiris, Thoth, and the Apis Bull (a sacred bull worshipped in Saqqara, the same site where this stela was unearthed), while the scene at the bottom is remarkably un-Egyptian, showing the deceased Piabrm on a Grecian-style bier and the people around her performing Carian ceremonies. Note the second mourner from the left, who is lifting a knife to her forehead—a Carian mourning ritual of self-harm attested also in other sources.

When it comes to language, the stela is wholly Carian: the text carved on it, recording the name and other information about the deceased, is not written in Egyptian hieroglyphs—as one would perhaps expect on a funerary stela from Egypt showing Egyptian deities—but in the deceased’s original language and writing, the Carian alphabet.

### A multicultural Egypt

It was finally with the conquest of the country by Alexander the Great in the year 332 B.C. and with the subsequent Ptolemaic Period (ending with the Roman conquest in 30 B.C.) that Egypt became a proper multicultural and multilingual country at all levels of society and in virtually all corners of the country. A new line of rulers took over the throne of
Egypt—the Ptolemies—and, as these rulers originated from Greece, Greek became one of Egypt’s official languages, alongside Egypt’s old indigenous languages and scripts.

No better artefact on display in the exhibition at the Getty could exemplify this than the stela of Kallimachos. This granite stela was originally set up in the temple of Amun at Karnak in the year 39 B.C. during the reign of the last Ptolemaic ruler, queen Cleopatra VII. It contains a decree issued by the local priests to honor a general named Kallimachos, who is praised in the text as a powerful local benefactor.

Already at first sight, one notices some irregularities in this stela: this is due to the fact that the priests of Karnak were clearly working on a budget and had to reuse an earlier monument from the Pharaonic Period. Most of its original hieroglyphic text and scene were erased. Only the images of the winged sun-disc and of the two gods (Amun-Re and Montu) with related hieroglyphic captions were preserved in the center. The Ptolemaic sculptors then added two new images to the sides, those of the ruler Cleopatra and of her heir Caesarion (her son by Julius Caesar), along with the hieroglyphic captions identifying them.

The lower two thirds of the stela were covered with the decree itself written in “both Greek and native letters,” as the stela itself proclaims—that is, presented bilingually, in both Demotic and Greek, so as to cater to both possible audiences. Hieroglyphs (to write Middle Egyptian), Demotic, and Greek are all present side-by-side on this one monument, reflecting on stone the composite identity and the cultural traditions of Hellenistic Egypt.
Hieroglyphs exported to Rome

Egypt was not the only laboratory for such interactions and experimentations in the multilingual world of the Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean. Artifacts inscribed in Egyptian also made their way to the four corners of the Roman Empire, and none are more remarkable than Egyptian obelisks. The obelisk of Benevento is paradigmatic in this respect. It was erected in the year 88 or 89 A.D. in the southern Italian city of Benevento to celebrate the Emperor Domitian and the Egyptian goddess Isis, whose local temple it decorated, along with a twin obelisk. Even more remarkable than the obelisk per se are the inscriptions on its four sides, which must have been commissioned to a member of the Egyptian priesthood well-versed in the ancient language (Middle Egyptian) and script (hieroglyphs) of his native culture.

Figure \(\PageIndex{99}\): Detail of the Benevento obelisk showing the text "Isis the great, lady of Benevento” inscribed in Egyptian hieroglyphs. Obelisk (detail, pre-conservation view), A.D. 88/89, Roman. Granite, 351.5 cm high. Collection: Benevento, Museo del Sannio, inv. 1916. Featured in the exhibition *Beyond the Nile: Egypt and the Classical World*

Despite its traditional and archaic form and language, the obelisk is still fully relevant to the place and time in which it was erected. The royal cartouches, which traditionally surround the pharaoh’s name, bear the name of Domitian transliterated into hieroglyphs. And even the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis is connected with the Italian city where the obelisk stood, as she is celebrated in the hieroglyphic text as "Isis the great, lady of Benevento."

A city of which the ancient Egyptians would never have heard thus received a rendering of its name in the most sacred and ancient language and script of ancient Egypt. This would have probably bemused the Latin-speaking inhabitants of Benevento themselves, had they been able to read the inscription—perhaps not much unlike the experience of modern residents of New York, when they see the name of their city rendered into Latin, in scholarly publications or Roman Catholic Church texts, as *Novum Eboracum*.

This essay first appeared in the *Getty Iris*. 
The Rosetta Stone

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Figure \(\PageIndex{100}\): *The Rosetta Stone*, 196 B.C.E., Ptolemaic Period, 112.3 x 75.7 x 28.4 cm, Egypt © Trustees of the British Museum. The Rosetta Stone was discovered in Egypt, at Fort St Julien in el-Rashid, known as Rosetta.

The key to translating hieroglyphics

The Rosetta Stone is one of the most important objects in the British Museum as it holds the key to understanding Egyptian hieroglyphs—a script made up of small pictures that was used originally in ancient Egypt for religious texts. Hieroglyphic writing died out in Egypt in the fourth century C.E. Over time the knowledge of how to read hieroglyphs was lost, until the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799 and its subsequent decipherment.

The Stone is a tablet of black rock called granodiorite. It is part of a larger inscribed stone that would have stood some 2 meters high. The top part of the stone has broken off at an angle—in line with a band of pink granite whose crystalline structure glints a little in the light. The back of the Rosetta stone is rough, where it has been hewn into shape, but the front face is smooth and crammed with text, inscribed in three different scripts. These form three distinct bands of writing.
Three translations of the same decree

The inscriptions are three translations of the same decree, passed by a council of priests, that affirms the royal cult of the thirteen-year-old Ptolemy V on the first anniversary of his coronation. The decree is inscribed on the stone three times, in hieroglyphic (suitable for a priestly decree), demotic (the native script used for daily purposes), and Greek (the language of the administration). The importance of this to Egyptology is immense. In the early years of the nineteenth century, scholars were able to use the Greek inscription on this stone as the key to deciphering the others.

Opposition to the Ptolemies

In previous years the family of the Ptolemies had lost control of certain parts of the country. It had taken their armies some time to put down opposition in the Delta, and parts of southern Upper Egypt, particularly Thebes, were not yet back under the government’s control.

Before the Ptolemaic era (that is before about 332 B.C.E.), decrees in hieroglyphs such as this were usually set up by the king. It shows how much things had changed from Pharaonic times that the priests, the only people who had kept the knowledge of writing hieroglyphs, were now issuing such decrees. The list of good deeds done by the king for the temples hints at the way in which the support of the priests was ensured.

The end of hieroglyphics

Soon after the end of the fourth century C.E., when hieroglyphs had gone out of use, the knowledge of how to read and write them disappeared. In the early years of the nineteenth century, some 1400 years later, scholars were able to use the Greek inscription on this stone as the key to decipher them.

The discovery

Thomas Young, an English physicist, was the first to show that some of the hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone wrote the sounds of a royal name, that of Ptolemy. The French scholar Jean-François Champollion then realized that hieroglyphs
recorded the sound of the Egyptian language and laid the foundations of our knowledge of ancient Egyptian language and culture.

Soldiers in Napoleon’s army discovered the Rosetta Stone in 1799 while digging the foundations of an addition to a fort near the town of el-Rashid (Rosetta). On Napoleon’s defeat, the stone became the property of the British under the terms of the Treaty of Alexandria (1801) along with other antiquities that the French had found.

The Rosetta Stone has been exhibited in the British Museum since 1802, with only one break. Towards the end of the First World War, in 1917, when the Museum was concerned about heavy bombing in London, they moved it to safety along with other, portable, ‘important’ objects. The Rosetta Stone spent the next two years in a station on the Postal Tube Railway 50 feet below the ground at Holborn.

**Analyzing the Rosetta Stone**

When the Rosetta Stone was discovered in 1799, the carved characters that covered its surface were quickly copied. Printer’s ink was applied to the Stone and white paper was laid over it. When the paper was removed, it revealed an exact copy of the text—but in reverse. Since then, many copies or “facsimiles” have been made using a variety of materials. Inevitably, the surface of the Stone accumulated many layers of material left over from these activities, despite attempts to remove any residue. Once on display, the grease from many thousands of human hands eager to touch the Stone added to the problem.

An opportunity for investigation and cleaning the Rosetta Stone arose when this famous object was made the centerpiece of the *Cracking Codes* exhibition at The British Museum in 1999. When work commenced to remove all but the original, ancient material, the stone was black with white lettering. As treatment progressed, the different substances uncovered were analyzed. Grease from human handling, a coating of carnauba wax from the early 1800s and printer’s ink from 1799 were cleaned away using cotton wool swabs and liniment of soap, white spirit, acetone and purified water. Finally, white paint in the text, applied in 1981, which had been left in place until now as a protective coating, was removed with cotton swabs and purified water. A small square at the bottom left corner of the face of the Stone was left untouched to show the darkened wax and the white infill.

The Stone has a dark grey-pinkish tone with a pink streak running through it. Today you can see traces of a reddish brown in the text. This material was analyzed and found to be a clear mineral known as hydroxyapatite; the color may be due to iron traces. The mineral may have been applied deliberately, but there is no proof of this. This substance is not known by experts to have been used as a pigment, nor to have been used as a base for painting (a ground) in ancient Egypt.

**Translation of the demotic text**

[Year 9, Xandikos day 4], which is equivalent to the Egyptian month, second month of Peret, day 18, of the King “The Youth who has appeared as King in the place of his Father,” the Lord of the Uraei “Whose might is great, who has established Egypt, causing it to prosper, whose heart is beneficial before the gods…”

[Read the rest of the Rosetta Stone translation here](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/01%3A_Ancient_Mediterranean/1.03%3A_Ancient_Egypt/1.03.001%3A_Rosetta_Stone_Translation)
Additional resources:

The Rosetta Stone from the BBC’s History of the World

Everything you ever wanted to Know about the Rosetta Stone (The British Museum)


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